

# Homily for the 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

September 11, 2022

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

*First Reading: Exodus 32:7-11, 13-14 (The Lord's wrath blazes up against his own people.)*

*Responsory: Psalm 51 (Have mercy on me, O God.)*

*Second Reading: 1 Timothy 1:12-17 (Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.)*

*Gospel: Luke 15:1-10 (The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin.)*

Jesus is quite puzzling to the scribes and Pharisees. His conduct is that of a holy and righteous man. His teaching demonstrates a deep knowledge of Scripture. Yet, he welcomes, and even shares table fellowship, with *sinners*. This makes no sense to them. A man like Jesus should know better than to allow people like that to bring dishonor upon him.

The scribes and Pharisees believe that sinners should be shunned by all holy and God-fearing people, for they think of sin as a sort of contagious disease of the spirit. A holy person could become spiritually polluted or “unclean” simply by associating with unrighteous people, even if he didn’t engage in the same sins as they did. Just being near them, calling them friends or disciples, would be enough to taint someone like Jesus. Thus, the scribes and Pharisees carefully avoid anyone whom they consider *unworthy* of their company. But, Jesus doesn’t seem to fear the contagion of sin. In fact, he seems delighted when sinners repent and choose to follow *his* way instead of their old sinful ways.

Jesus sees himself as a physician of the soul, one who can *heal* sinners and reconcile them with God. So, naturally, he’s not going to push sinners away. He has made it his mission to seek them out and save as many as possible. As St. Paul says in his letter to Timothy, “This saying is trustworthy and deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” Jesus doesn’t worry about other people’s sin rubbing off on him. Instead, he hopes that the love of God emanating from him will touch their hearts and turn them back to God.

Jesus consistently speaks of God as a loving Father, who is slow to anger and rich in mercy. In fact, his parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin go even further, suggesting that God actively *seeks out sinners* and *joyfully* forgives them. That striking image of God and all the heavenly host rejoicing over repentant sinners serves as a direct rebuke to the scribes’ and Pharisees’ flawed understanding of sin and grace. It also stands in stark contrast to the way that many Catholics have been taught to think about God’s forgiveness. I encounter many people in the confessional who fear that God will remain angry or disappointed with them, *even after forgiving their sins*. Sometimes I have to remind people of what Jesus said on this subject, namely, that God is *absolutely overjoyed* whenever a sinner repents. God’s joy must be even greater when a sinner moves beyond that initial *private* stirring of remorse and comes to be reconciled with God and the Church through the sacrament.

This unfortunate confusion about how God really feels about sinners probably can be traced back to the way that God is portrayed in the Old Testament. There are quite a few passages like our first reading today, which show an angry and vengeful God, determined to cleanse the world of evildoers. But, we need to be very careful about the lessons that we draw

from such passages. First of all, these terrible sinners who stir up the mighty wrath of God are always *unrepentant*. They are not people who regret their actions and turn to God for mercy. That's what Moses was trying to do on their behalf, because he knew that his fellow Israelites failed to grasp the seriousness of their sin. Secondly, there are plenty of Old Testament passages that show God in a much more favorable light. Numerous psalms and prophetic writings express God's gentleness and patience with his wayward people, not just his frustration and anger. So, the picture is much more complex than we might think from just one or two passages, taken out of context.

Another important factor to consider is that our understanding of God has developed a great deal over time, and continues to develop in response to God's ongoing revelation. So, even though *God* has not changed, a comparison of biblical passages from different time periods may give that impression. The Gospels, especially, introduce a radically new way of seeing God. Because Jesus is one with the Father, he had a unique ability to reveal the mind and heart of God. And, what he revealed was a God with high moral standards, who demands that his followers seek perfection, but who is deeply compassionate and forgiving when we inevitably fall short because of our human weaknesses.

The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin also highlight another important aspect of God's mercy. Both parables emphasize how much *each individual sinner* matters to God. He doesn't want to lose even a single one of his straying sheep, and he will go to great lengths to find and rescue each one. That should give us great comfort whenever we feel somewhat lost and ashamed of ourselves. The very fact that our conscience bothers us so much is testimony to God's outreach. Even before we turn to him, he calls out to us. The contrition that we feel is his gift to us. It is the voice of the shepherd, calling his lost sheep by name and pleading with it to come back home.

We can also take comfort in knowing that God has not forgotten or abandoned any of our loved ones who have strayed from the Church, either by drifting away from their practice of the faith or even formally renouncing it. These parables can encourage us to keep hoping and praying that God will somehow find them wandering in the wilderness and bring them back. It might take many years, but we know that the Lord will not give up on any of them. Jesus made it very clear that God will not be content to save *most* of us; he wants to save *all* of us.

One final aspect of the parables that is worth noting is the *communal* celebration that takes place after the lost one has been found. All of us can rejoice in, and take inspiration from, other people's conversion stories. That's why there is great value in sharing those stories, in appropriate settings. They're a staple on many retreats, like Christ Renews His Parish, and in support groups, like Alcoholics Anonymous. There is great power in our personal testimonies to the mercy of God. When we can share openly how we became lost and how God rescued us, others who feel lost at that moment may become encouraged and strengthened to seek reconciliation. St. Paul utilized his own conversion story in this way, offering himself and his ministry as proof of God's infinite mercy. Many of us can do the same, recalling how we have experienced God's mercy *and* God's joy.